

For the Sake of Argument: Psycho-social Principles for Indian Education*

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As the title intimates, this paper is a first exploration, in terms of the theory and research of three social scientists, of some of the problems and difficulties currently encountered in the Indian schools of Alberta. Towards this end a description of what appears to be the essential problem, as it strikes this writer, will be presented; then in terms of this point of departure, four sets of considerations will be made.

The Essential Problem

All those involved in Indian education are well familiar with the problems of low educational achievement and high drop-out rates. Teachers particularly, of two or more years of experience possess invaluable first-hand experience, and because of this constitute an impressive body of experts. The reverse side of the coin, it is contended, reveals that the personal perspectives to be found within the group are too infrequently over-generalized, or in other words, are unduly biased. The problem is one of tapping this unique source of insights and yet at the same time point to and control the varying prevalent outlooks.

Assuming that the trained educators to be found in our schools are in the main of middle-class background, two fundamental biases can be pointed to. These express themselves when such educators encounter deviance from the values which underlie his training and background. As Dr. Spilka affirms:

"The first is to simplify the situation into an I-you, or we-they dichotomy in which all possible impediments are usually assigned to those who appear to stand in the way of what the teacher feels is right. Second, this polarization of the educational process obscures the real complexity of the total situation." (p.1, 1966)

It is the real complexity of the situation that too many fail to fathom - and quite likely through no one's fault, to date at any rate. Educators in Indian schools generally become quickly aware that one is confronted by pupils who are products of a different cultural perspective. However, the failing lies in not considering that one is facing a real culture made up of remnants of the former culture combined with the ²relative isolation of a rural environment and a ³high level of poverty with its concomitants of physical and mental deprivations and frustrations. Of special significance is that this setting is in turn within a broader and more pervasive controlling context, i.e. that of traditional Canadian culture with its dominants of individual success and achievement. There is little doubt that traditional white, middle-class society will prevail for years to come. Therefore, social, political, and economic advancement on the part of Albertan Indians must be formulated and engineered in terms of the dominant culture. How this will be done is the basic problem. This last statement will be refined as this paper proceeds.

Indisputably education in its broadest sense is the prime channel for such change. As clear as such a statement is, and equally as obvious, it nevertheless in turn raises the problem of the definition of education. It is not the purpose of this study to enter fully into such a discussion, necessary as it may be.

*This paper is based almost exclusively on the writings of J. Bryde, A. Fisher, and of B. Spilka particularly — educational psychologist, anthropologist, social psychologist, respectively. This paper was presented at a meeting of the Central Local of the Alberta Indian Education Association, Hobbema, Feb. 2nd, 1967.

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Suffice it to say that the meaning of education lies not only in its content and in its objectives, but also in how it is brought to those we influence through it. In terms of this "how", the teacher is readily seen to represent much more than himself. In the fullest sense of the word, the teacher is the symbol and purveyor of General Canadian culture and all it stands for. The significance of this, of course, lies in the eyes of the beholder, in this instance the Indian child. An appreciation of this viewpoint is essential to successful teaching. This then constitutes from the standpoint of school educators the one basic problem. It behooves us therefore, we would like to suggest, to examine: (a) the fundamentals of our culture, setting these elements against the current dynamic situation of Indian culture, particularly against what might be referred to as "residues" or "remnants" of former Indian culture therein; (b) the kind of response that is elicited from the Indian child in this confrontation; (c) the usefulness of the concept of alienation in this regard; (d) the consequences of its use for educators, together with further suggestions for our school program.

A. The Fundamentals of Canadian Culture

It is held that individual and group behavior is premised upon values, and that the most significant set of values are those that underlie the culture of which the individual is a product. The tone or atmosphere of Canadian culture is one such that within it individual success and achievement possess near sacrosanct value. We are very much inclined to think that there is nothing lower than a person who does not strive to better himself. Self-betterment is conceived of primarily in economic terms. Intellectual and artistic self-fulfillment rate second to financial success. The ideal that has been set forth in our white schools in the main has been that of the self-made man who attains to success in a morally responsible way. The school, perhaps more than any other institution in our society, in its teachings and requirements, reflects primarily these social aspirations. This becomes clear if we observe how at each stage of the total learning process, rewards are attendant upon competitive success. Our system strives to instill the belief that one should value good grades, the assumption being that the acquisition of knowledge in school will insure accomplishments of a higher order as life proceeds. The latter in turn presupposes that there is a correlation between "grades" and "knowledge" — which is a position open to debate.

How does the Indian child respond to these requirements?

B. The Indian's Response

Our Indian children come from a somewhat collectivistic heritage, and also come from a very much lower socio-economic environment. He arrives at school already in possession of a whole set of learned cultural responses. How is our culture likely to be seen by him?

The following two facts of his background counter squarely the high premium placed by the school on individual achievement. The effect of permissive upbringing on the Indian child is to deeply foster a close trust and reliance on others about him. Anything therefore that threatens to separate him from his own constitutes a serious threat to his sense of self, for he has little else than their support. Secondly, within his own environment, what images of success are there for him to view and imitate?

According to Dr. Spilka, research reveals that the school teacher and the nurse seem to stand out; however both are usually quite outside of the child's circle and may also represent a threat to him. It is fairly well established that the white man and those who think and act like him are not likely to be perceived as friends. Contrary to this last point of view is that of Dr. Fisher who maintains that the Blood Indians of Southern Alberta do have a good sense of self. The Blood knows who he is; he has success models, e.g. Tom Three Persons, Fred Gladstone, Fred Tailfeathers, Pete Bruisedhead — all rodeo hands. With regard to our Indians of Central Province, would not a close study of their background and current circumstances reveal considerable degree of

pervasive hostility toward the dominant White? If so, this component of Indian behavior would constitute a serious obstacle to be overcome.

In addition to the individualized and competitive elements of the school, one need also recognize that the usual signs of achievement may appear to be quite senseless to the Indian pupil. Teachers vary in their ability to render curriculum personally significant. Regardless of this however, they still must present such in a controlled group situation, of itself symbolic of the proverbial and potential enemy.

An examination of the sub-values supporting this central achievement-success theme will reveal further the extent of the counter-motivation.

Describing the conventional orientation of the typical middle-class American Dr. Spilka writes:

"American middle-class children are exhorted to be practical, adaptable and efficient. Achievement is often premised on the notion of solving the real and pressing problems of everyday life. In the average Anglo community, schoolwork has become part of the life of the typical family. Parents are concerned with the educational performance of their children. Through their own experience in similar settings, the importance of the three R's is taken for granted and this is impressed upon the young even before they enter school. School is looked forward to as inevitable, essential, and pleasurable." (p.5, 1966)

It is this world-outlook that is at opposites with lower-class or Indian perspectives. Of itself, in the main, the school provides no basis for bringing parents and children together. The school and those who are part of this context must appear quite impractical and inefficient by Indian standards and the day-to-day requirements of reservation living. But perhaps this situation is changing or has changed. Is it not true that little Indians all want to go to school today and that most Indian parents support education, if only in an oblique way?

Let us continue to assume that there is this opposition of values. Such can be intensified through the teachers, who, like middle-class parents, strive to instill in their pupils that requisite to success motivation: a long-range, future perspective. The effort, in other words, is made to teach the child not that tomorrow is another day, but that what is learned in school prepares one for confronting the tasks in the indefinite future. Reserve conditions which are largely of a subsistence level, do not prepare and enhance a long-range, future orientation. The importance of the future might be speculated upon also through observing the teacher. Although research reveals that becoming a teacher or a nurse may be often expressed as an aspiration, this can readily be explained on the basis of the easy identification of these professions as having the "good" things on the reserve. No understanding of the prerequisites to such vocational goals is present, and, what is unfortunate, in terms of the many success images that Indian children are exposed to in school, the teacher may appear as the purveyor of such values. Finally, it can be doubted that the teacher is viewed as gaining great satisfaction and pleasure in what he has to do, since it so often entails making the children feel miserable and unhappy.

Another factor in our Achievement-Success pattern of values, and which plays a negative role, is that the road to success is one of hard work. In the Indian view-point hard work can rarely be considered as an avenue to lasting satisfaction. The effort demanded of the Indian frequently must appear more trying to him than what he sees his white counterpart as engaged in, yet the latter almost invariably is in a better political and economic position. Clearly hard work may be necessary to survive. Typically, however, the lower class environment of the Indian and his own cultural traditions provide no basis for personal worth, dignity, or inherent satisfaction and pleasure to the individual from "hard work".

"This is a very middle class concept, affirms Spilka, that in today's world even the representatives of the latter seriously doubt. We have thus come to value 'using one's head', find 'the angles' or 'getting to know the right people' more than 'honest labor' or the 'sweat of one's brow'". (p. 8, 1966)

To sum up, the point being established thus far is that the teacher, because of background, goals and traditions, conveys the General Canadian cultural values stressing success and achievement. Complementary to this, it is suggested, both these goals and the avenues thereto unfortunately fail to make much sense to the Indian child, with the result that he may perceive himself as the unwilling victim of the school while biding the opportunity to leave.

C. Usefulness of the Concept of Alienation

1. Description

At the outset of this section it should be noted that despite the noteworthy use made of the concept of alienation, as will be presently described, this concept should perhaps be discarded because of its complexity for one more positive in emphasis, such as perhaps "ego identity", and degrees thereof in terms of "cultural conflict". However, it is in use and deserves examination.

A review of the literature will reveal many attempts at classifying individual response relative to the broader social context in which human behavior occurs. Psychiatric and clinical-psychological formulations have been used by various authors in an attempt to understand Indian children. Their varying emphases on asocial, individual-centered orientation, can leave the reader confused. One is never sure if dealing with an intra-individual behavior complex, or psychosocial scheme. The requirement, really, is that one keep in hand both the interaction between the students' extra-school environment and his daily experience in the classroom. The Bryde-Spilka position, with supporting data at hand, is that the concept of Alienation meets the above requisite. The hypothesis is that the disjointed nature of school-society relationships on the reserve tend to create an alienated disposition or frame-of-mind in many Indian school children. The immediate consequence of this alienated world outlook is seen in the high drop-out rate and the declining pattern of achievement, so characteristic of the Indian school group.

Different writers and researchers have described this in different ways. One group of theorists proposes that Alienation is a complex concept, and rightly, which includes a number of subjective states, referred to as: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. This last facet is considered to be the central core of the concept, and is used to describe the feeling the alienated individual has that he no longer senses that he is doing what he desires to do. By powerlessness is meant a feeling of helplessness and futility. Normlessness designates a lack of perceived rules and standards to define right and wrong; while meaninglessness suggests an inability to know what will result from one's actions, hence a low probability of predicting the future outcomes of behavior, or of "making sense" out of the present situation. Lastly, social isolation identifies the feeling that one does not belong or fit in. The theory is that these five characteristics of Alienation are at the heart of the educational difficulties that plague Indian children. Thus we can sense a little more clearly the import of what was initially pointed to as being the essential problem of the school. The problem lies in finding ways of countering these tendencies.

2. Supportive evidence

It is safe to say that there is a very rapidly growing body of literature strongly focussing on the concept of Alienation as basic to many of the often puzzling and very troubling undesirable behaviors and conditions found on the

reserve. The task, partially started, that remains is one of verifying locally the hypotheses and research carried on in order areas of the Plains.

(a) Re the School Itself

Evidence has well established that drop-outs demonstrate alienation and its components to a far greater degree than those who finish school. Alienation is more serious and prevalent the earlier the dropping out of school occurs. It is not clear whether alienation is a cause or a result of dropping out/under-achievement.

It has been found that not only among Indian children, but among non-Indian children as well, the lower one's educational achievement, the stronger are his tendencies to this behavioral pattern. The 1964 Bryde Study revealed a strong association between alienation and lowered achievement, one which also increased with the age of the pupil. Similar results have been obtained with non-Indians of slum areas. Current research on the Pine Ridge Reservation manifests this same pattern. It seems therefore rather conclusive, according to Bryde and Spilka, that the process of alienation is very much at the core of the major problems of adjusting to the requirements of the school. It is unfortunate that the school itself may have traditionally contributed to the growth of these tendencies.

The reasons for the development of this frame of mind have already been outlined. On the individual level, norms and standards of behavior can become stable and functional only when they gain support from all major learning situations. The hypothesis again is that the Indian child is continually exposed to environments that lack such congruence. For example, on the point of personal autonomy: his home is quite likely to be at variance with the school. On the one hand, in the home, action arises out of inner desire and personal decision; on the other hand, in the school, control is exercised by a restrictive and often-times fear-inspiring authoritarian framework of do's and don'ts.

The import of this last distinction is better set forth in Spilka's words:

"When one determines what he does, meaning is everpresent and with it the perception of power and capability. Self-estrangement is naturally absent for personal motives are being realized. The potential of social co-ordination and communication also has a high probability of being a concomitant in such circumstances, especially for the Indian child. Within the limits of rural poverty, this is the situation that exists on the reservation outside of the classroom." (p. 12, 1966)

A "pattern of teaching", as Dr. Fisher says, that fosters such congruence is unfortunately, in the main, not to be found in our schools. And in all fairness to both teachers and administrators in general it should be stressed that this is much less their fault than that the weakness lies in the basic nature of the school in our society.

For example, the school requires conformity and discipline -- at least this has been the tendency to date. Philosophers of education have long extolled the ideals of educating the individual, but such, as practise reveals, is virtually impossible in the group-teacher climate of the classroom. Further to this, curriculum and syllabus demands deny the face-to-face and person-to-person aspirations, held up as the purpose of Canadian education by the purists. The combination of these traits of the teacher-learning process unsurprisingly sharply conflict with the expectations and motivations of most Indian children.

In a word, we expect the child to do what is meaningless to him. Because of this, components of alienation appear: a sense of powerlessness, close-followed by self-estrangement. To remove the self from under these pressures is tantamount to increasing psychosocial isolation. The child appears to encapsulate himself, becoming less and less responsive to the teacher, a tendency that is not without social support from peers. Research strikingly reveals that a more pervasive kind of social isolation apparently attends continuation in school, i.e. the child staying in school feels more and more ostracized and alone than the student who either refuses to perform or drops out of school.

Unfortunate as the influence of the school may be, more tragic is that the alienating nature of the school is part of a larger context which, in the long run, is probably the more significant contributor to this syndrome.

(b) Re the Larger Context

Poverty and prejudice are two features of the extra-school environment that are of special interest.

To return to our society, wherein one is continually exposed to signs of material affluence, it is clear that one who does not attain achievement and success has no one to blame but himself. If one lacks the symbols of "having made it", he alone is responsible. It is because of this that alienation increases as class level goes down. Faced with the general social devaluation of those who cannot display evidence of success it becomes very difficult to maintain a sense of personal pride and worth.

As indicated earlier, another aspect of this situation stems from the fact that the signs of accomplishment overwhelmingly have accrued to the Whites. Together with this, is the well known fact that the "best" of what the Indian had in the past was taken from him by the Whites. In return, he was left with the poorest land, and urged to take on ways of living contrary to those of his heritage. As a result his image of those who defeated and humiliated the Indians is understandably negative. In the States particularly, as well as in Canada, the Whites readily and consistently lied and cheated in their relationships with Indians. They also demonstrated an overriding bigotry that was and still is often affiliated with persistent indications of discrimination. It is accepted fact that those who are victimized by prejudice, usually generalize their alienative feelings to all members of their opposition. And concomitant with such sensitivity to rejection there also develops a pattern of negative self-views that denies personal worth and dignity to the person who is the object of prejudice. In light of this, one would readily expect that Indian children possess such anxieties regarding their teachers, so much so, that even the innocent remark or action by the teacher can be interpreted as prejudicial.

So as to not leave you with a dismal picture of White-Indian relations, and of the role of the school on the reserve, let us point to the potential of the school and its accomplishments.

(c) Accomplishments of the School; Its Possibilities

One may ask for information regarding the ability and achievement of Alberta Indian children. At this moment I.Q. records have not yet been referred to. Inasmuch as this writer can recall, non-verbal I.Q.'s for the various grades fall between 95 and 105, and verbal I.Q.'s approximately five to ten points lower. Intelligence-wise, Indian children have always been considered to look like an average group of pupils, such as can be found anywhere. In other words, there is no reason to be concerned with basic endowment.

Turning to attainment measures, we should recall that as grade level increases, the tests rely increasingly on verbal material. Averaging the performance of Blackfoot and Ermineskin children on the California Achievement Test battery for grades four to eight for the period 1959-1964 presents a graph of the "cross-over phenomenon" type, (cf. Appendix). The level of achievement is markedly above the national norm up to the sixth grade. This statistic contrasts with results for the South Dakota Sioux for whom the crossover moment is towards the seventh grade (cf. Appendix, The Bryde Study). Part of the explanation for these depressed scores certainly lies in the fact of verbal deficiency on the part of the students. Were it possible to study the achievement for our children during the last ten years, one would discover, we are sure, evidence of a slow but steady increase in performance. The work of Coombs, Kron, Collister, and Anderson in the mid-'50's revealed that 7th grade students performed at about the 6.5 grade placement level. By 1964 this increased to a grade placement of 7.0, while the 8th graders stood at the 7.5 level. It is thus probably that the schools on the reservations are slowly and surely getting their message across. There is progress despite all. Another facet of the problem then is one of how to speed it up.

D. Suggestions

The following observations are suggestions which grow out of the foregoing theory on alienation. Some of the procedures have been attempted with other disadvantaged minorities and initial results have been heartening.

To counter alienation a concerted effort must be made to make the child feel that he 'belongs' in the school situation. Fr. Bryde, has been able to show that when persons felt they "fit-in", their feelings of self-estrangement, isolation, meaninglessness, and powerlessness tend to dissipate. The technique is simply to provide success experiences for the children. In Spilka's words:

"Even almost insignificant signs of capability should be abstracted from situations in which overall performance may be poor. Every change to provide a sense of personal worth and dignity should be employed, for there appears a readiness to assimilate failure more than success, and negative views of oneself, the teachers and school rather than images which may reduce the gap between the pupil and the educational process." (p. 17, 1966)

On the basis of work done with Spanish-American children from lower class areas, it is suggested that when one deals with persons in a position of greater power and status, he quite naturally feels powerless and relatively insignificant. The emphasis required on the part of the dominating figure then is to value and recognize the individual in the secondary position. That teachers make a special effort to be polite and singularly observant is most desirable. Thus, says Spilka:

"...the student comes to reflect the teacher's view that he has worth merit, that he is a noteworthy being, and once he gains such security, there is increased likelihood of his reciprocating in kind. A basis for meaningful social relationship is thus established." (p. 18, 1966)

Barriers between the school and the Indian community need to be reduced. Such an effort should be one of involving the teachers in the life of the community, rather than attempt to bring the Indian family into the school setting. This necessary in order to counter the effects of classroom confrontation, which while providing valuable information, they tend to present a distorted picture of Indian life and its lower-class poverty correlates. This is a slow process. Understanding depends on communication, and teachers need to gain first hand knowledge of Indian feeling towards the school, its role and purposes.

In addition to the preceding, an organized effort should be made to utilize the wealth of talent and experience which exists within the schools themselves. A series of group seminars might be scheduled and periodically coordinated across the schools. We must accept the fact that some educators are more effective than others in getting their ideas across and accomplishing these ends in a manner effective in countering alienation. The successful educator and the seasoned teaching veteran should be identified and increasingly employed. The real experts are to be found in the schools, and not outside of this domain.

The preceding suggestions must be viewed within the total context of the school and its demands for standards and discipline which need to be upheld and maintained.

Control with mutual understanding is an essential prerequisite to the maintenance of standards. The teacher who is sincerely interested in his pupils has a high likelihood of making it to the point of not being considered an "outsider". At all times the child must know what is expected and why it is necessary. A context of positive human considerations is necessary to assure good effect to disciplinary action. The child being punished must be brought to realize not only his error, but also that the teacher administering the restrictions does regard him as a person worthy of respect and value. Of great importance is the very careful use of public punishments - if they are to be used at all. Dr. Fisher argues that there should be none of these among Indian students, for the shame and ridicule thereof are too great. If the child so placed can affiliate with other pupils in common cause, the teacher will be the outsider and the class will be united in opposition, and class control is lost. The secret is to obtain the support of the majority of the class against the offender. This is fundamental to the development of an identification with the school and its purposes.

The problem of "assimilation" or of "integration" must be clearly thought through. The schools' declared purpose is to turn out persons who will be good citizens representing the best of General Canadian culture. (Whether in practise this achieved even in White schools is a moot point). This question has been the center of much controversy for many years. The "hard-headed" position maintains that for all intents and purposes Indian culture is dead. Vestiges thereof are to be surrendered in toto. In reply, it must be recognized that the economical and political structure of traditional Indian society is definitely past. The child-rearing practices that produced the warriors and hunters of the past however still persist. It is this largely that ill-prepares the Indian child for the controlled and directed environment of the school. Change in this area, if it is to come, and if desirable, will be many years in the making, and will therefore continue to be a source of frustration for school people. This point of difference focusses on the question of whether the Indian must become, in his relationships with the cominant culture, and within his innermost being, a "reasonable facscimile" of the average White person. Must he give up his name and deny his heritage? To do so would be psychologically absurd. This question and others related to it are long-range questions and remain to be answered.

We are inclined to think of our nation as a kind of great "Melting Pot". This is a myth. There has been far less assimilation than one might think. For one thing, overwhelmingly members of different religious groups do not tend to intermarry. Religious traditions hence have not been melded together to produce a unitary Canadian way of religious life. In addition, many nationalities have perpetuated their own heritage and identity by intra-group marriages. Admittedly there is a slow erosion of these tendencies, but they still serve the purpose of knowing who one is. When one possesses a firm ego-identity from which to act he is protected against alienative forces. Pride in heritage implies dignity for self. Serious consideration therefore should be given to teaching various selected aspects of Indian history and culture within the schools, for as Fr. Bryde has shown, this may be one of the most fruitful means of creating the attachment to education that is so strongly needed among Indian children. In Dr. Fisher's words, this also means that "...the teacher should be well aware of the contemporary situation, of its antecedents, and of some generalizations about American

Indians." (p. 24, 1966). When one know positively who he is, he may then know the direction to follow in order to enhance himself.

Conclusion

Once again, the foregoing was an attempt to present the essential problem facing school educators, and how the concept of alienations sheds considerable light upon its causes. The suggestion is that the schools consciously foster counter-alienative relationships between Indian children and their teachers. It is a matter of recognizing that what teachers convey to their classes is less the traditional content of the school less than the signs and symbols of who they are and what they stand for. What is pointed to here is the very person himself as vehicle of communication and the message. Effective education should bring the child and the teacher into the same social process of a human and meaningful relationship, which means that the teacher exhibits deep and genuine feeling for her pupils and their ideas.

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